

Asia Pacific Media Educator

| Issue 12

Article 16

12-2002

Book review: Journalism: Theory in Practice

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The Hong Kong Standard

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Recommended Citation

Wilson, K., Book review: Journalism: Theory in Practice, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 12, 2002, 223-225.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss12/16>

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TAPSALL, Suellen & VARLEY, Carolyn (eds) (2002)
Journalism: Theory in Practice, Oxford University Press. ISBN
 971-8686-34-7. 270pp.

Reviewed by Karl Wilson

Editor, The Hong Kong Standard

There was a time, not that long ago, when newspapers were an essential source of news. The advent of the Internet and 24-hour television news such as CNN and BBC World has changed all that.

Thirty years ago Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein won the Pulitzer Prize for Watergate, the scandal which eventually brought down President Richard Nixon. The two young Washington Post reporters launched an entire generation into print journalism, not only in America but around the world.

Could the same be done today? Probably not.

Woodward, now a senior editor at the Washington Post, told the Journalism 2002 Conference in Melbourne last year that: "... if you have an exclusive story, and you think it's original and exclusive, you're liable to see it on CNN at four o'clock in the afternoon. Thirty years ago that was not the case."

In Australia there has been an ongoing debate within the industry about what we as journalists do and how we do it. News Limited's CEO, John Hartigan, told a PANPA conference in Adelaide last year that: "... newspapers, especially the so-called quality broadsheets, have forgotten about the people in the factories; the people on the trains; the people in the suburbs; the people on the farms. The real people, and the real issues which are real to them have dropped off the radar."

Hartigan said the industry was in danger of producing a generation of journalists who only know people over the telephone - and then, only hear the views of spin doctors, whether they be corporate or political. "Today the tendency is for the top journalists, particularly those known as the opinion makers, to dine in the best restaurants; be seen in all the right places; and live in the best addresses." It is a snobbery, he said, which also infects newspaper management.

Hartigan's speech hit a raw nerve but few found argument in what he had to say. Newspapers are facing an uncertain future and that is a fact of life. Not only are they losing ground to the Internet and 24-hour television news channels but their budgets are being squeezed, advertising revenues are down and circulation

falling. But above all they have lost relevance in the communities they serve. The one bright spot has been the growth in community newspapers.

Peter Preston, editorial director of the Guardian Media Group, wrote in the Fourth Quarter 2002 IPI Global Journalist: "I'm constantly struck by the ferment over roads, schools and parks that grips the community I live in. Are these small issues, too trivial for national attention? Maybe. But here in Britain, as elsewhere, it is the local papers and broadcasting stations that are growing."

David Shaw writing in the Los Angeles Times recently said: "Most people buy a daily newspaper because they're interested in what's happening in the world at large - especially when, as now, much of what's happening is confusing, even frightening. People want help making sense of the day's events." He was commenting on the difficulty newspapers have connecting with their readers and keeping them.

Connecting the "personal to the political" and the "global to the local" is a matter of survival for newspapers, which, in the United States at least, have been losing circulation for more than 30 years, Shaw wrote. "Knowing that they [newspapers] risk becoming irrelevant to readers who are busier than ever, and who have ever more alternative sources of information, many newspapers across the country [USA] are trying desperately to make those connections."

Suellen Tapsall and Carolyn Varley, both journalism academics in Australia, have produced a timely book which will undoubtedly add to the debate. *Journalism: Theory and Practice* is a collection of essays written by some of Australia's leading journalism educators and is an attempt to examine the functions of journalists and journalism by combining theory with practice.

Divided into seven chapters each one examines a different theme. For example, chapter one "What is a Journalist?" written by Tapsall and Varley, is an attempt to define the contemporary Australian journalist. It examines how the journalist's role has changed and how journalists perceive their roles and the issues that impact on them. Much of the chapter draws on material gathered from their research project "Definition: Journalist", which involved interviews with some of the countries leading journalists and journalism educators.

Twenty years ago the typical Australian journalist was mainly male, opinionated, hard-drinking and hard-living. That may have been the case 30 years ago. Today, there are more women in the business and the hard-drinking, hard-living stereotype no longer holds true.

Thirty years ago, most journalists came through the copyboy system. Today they tend to be graduates from journalism schools.

What Tapsall and Varley have done is to highlight the changes affecting the industry.

In the chapter "Journalism: Beyond the Business", Katrina Mandy Oakham, examines the "insidious nature of the commercial forces driving and redefining journalism." She makes the point that journalists are "no longer the public's watchdogs or privileged members of the fourth estate. They are business people producing a product for market." In the Fairfax group, for example, editors-in-chief are now publishers. In other words, they have a foot in both the journalistic and commercial camps.

While essentially an academic work, the collection of essays in "Journalism: Theory and Practice" should be read by all journalists for a critical reflection on the profession. ■

ROBIE, David (ed) (2001)

The Pacific Journalist: A Practical Guide, University of the South Pacific. ISBN 9982-1-3851. 372 pp.

Reviewed by John Herbert

Staffordshire University, United Kingdom

In 1995 I presented a paper at an AMIC conference in Singapore in which I ranted against the creeping globalisation of practical journalism books, meaning that they were increasingly American with American cultural values and American examples and ways of doing things. We needed locally written books on practical journalism to counter the educational encroachment of American books. Preferably in the local languages, but English would do as long as the content was local. I was lecturing in Hong Kong at the time and was specifically thinking of that market, as well as Singapore.

Countries in the developing world need their own books—urgently. What was needed, I said, was a series of books that gave students in countries such as Hong Kong, China and the South Pacific their own books on the practice of journalism, with their own examples, laws and ethics, their own cultural differences highlighted, and, where necessary in their own languages; or at least in English but with local situations and journalistic problems explored and explained.

The Pacific Journalist: A Practical Guide seeks to fill this vacuum in the South Pacific. As Robie says in his acknowledgements, "... to help address this need, I have gathered a group of contributors,